



## JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT

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**HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS**

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### REPORT

To: Members of Commissioners Court  
From: Jim Bethke, Director, Justice Administration Department  
CC: Budget Management Department  
Date: Oct. 20, 2020

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### Opportunities for Participatory Budgeting in Harris County

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## **BACKGROUND**

During the June 9th, 2020 Commissioners Court meeting, the Court approved a motion made by County Judge Lina Hidalgo instructing the Justice Administration Department (JAD) and PFM Group to develop a process for meaningfully engaging the community in the current budgeting evaluations for all criminal justice departments funded by Harris County. JAD submitted a scope of work memo to the court on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, and began working with the Budget Management Department (BMD) on this report.

This report outlines opportunities and challenges to developing a participatory budgeting process in Harris County that is meant to engage the community in budgeting evaluations meaningfully. The Justice Administration Department acknowledges the Budget Management Department for its collaboration, support, and contributions to this report. Also, it recognizes PFM Group for the materials they shared from other jurisdictions on the topic. The department would like to thank the individuals who shared their knowledge on this topic via the interview process. See the list at the end of this document.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The contents of this report were gathered through (1) the review and comparison of how other jurisdictions implement community engagement strategies to inform their budgeting process; (2) the review of training material used by jurisdictions to inform the public on their budgeting process; (3) the review of recommended guidelines for meaningful community engagement; (4) analysis of budget cycles that accommodate public participation; (5) public-facing documents and describing metrics on budget outcomes and approaches (6) qualitative evidence of desired budgeting outcomes that use community engagement to determine resource allocation; (7) interviews and email correspondence with agency officials, budget directors, community groups, and; (8) outside reviews of such processes.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Participatory budgeting is a process by which policymakers engage residents in part of a public budget, giving them real power to inform budgetary decisions and identify which investments will best meet their needs. Key elements of participatory budgeting include: having a designated source of money, an agreed-upon process, and a schedule for deciding funding allocations, staff to mediate and facilitate the process, and outreach to get residents involved in the process. Participatory budgeting aims to meaningfully engage community members, build stronger relationships between residents and government, and make spending more equitable, effective, and responsive.

To help Harris County develop a meaningful participatory budgeting process, this report explores methods and best practices learned from other jurisdictions and highlights model programs from across the country. This report then outlines preliminary steps Harris County can take to establish a participatory budgeting process, including a detailed pilot project proposal that would increase the County's capacity for community participation in the budgeting process, leveraging efforts already underway by JAD and BMD.

The proposed pilot project would be a joint effort between JAD and the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department. The project would establish a Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund in which a backbone nonprofit organization could actively partner with grantee direct service providers and leaders to strengthen their capacity, improve their services, and monitor whether their services are helping youth in the long term.

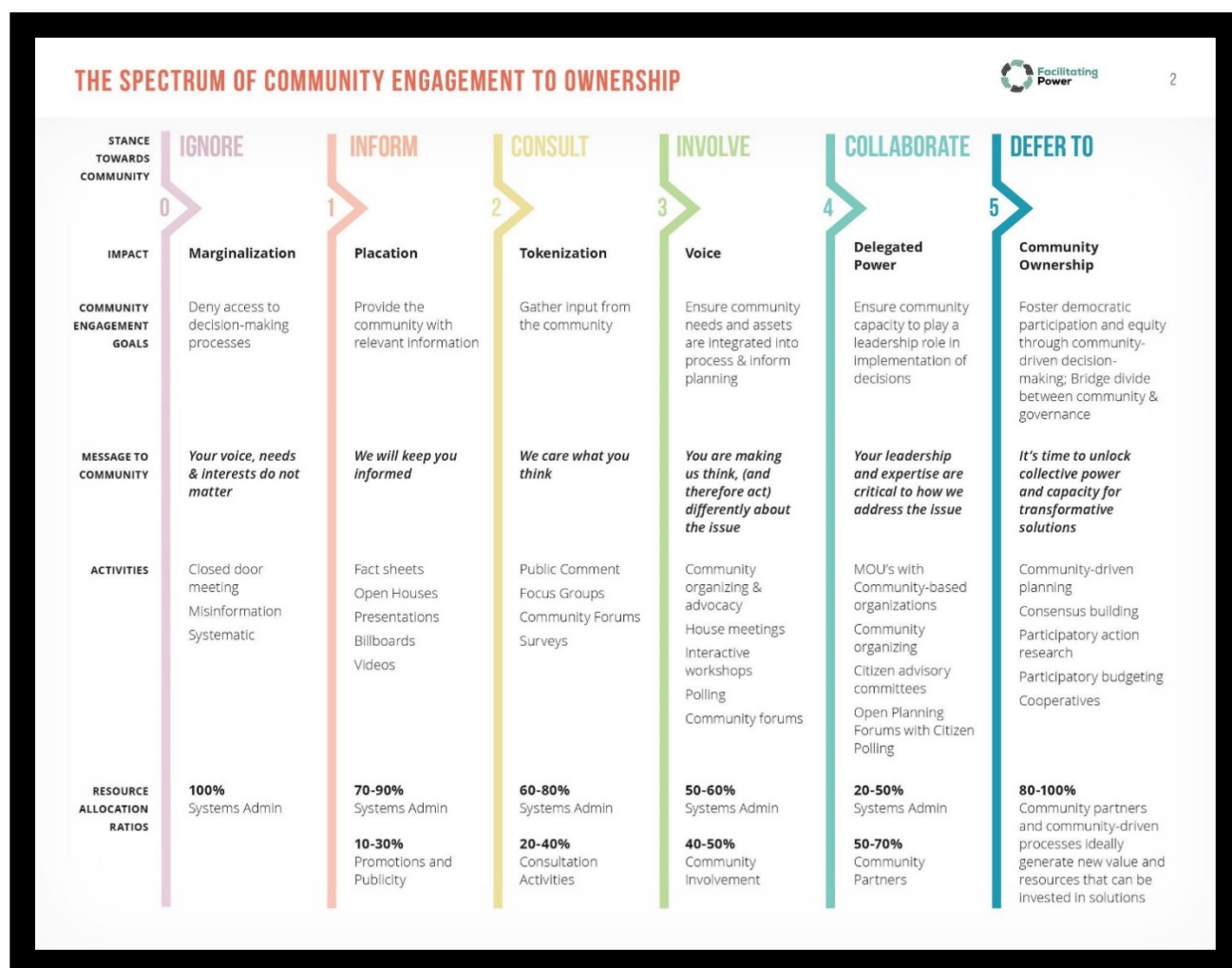
This report outlines the proposed pilot program's first-year goals, which would include engaging communities heavily impacted by juvenile incarceration and poverty, developing tools for participation and feedback, making the process meaningful and accessible, and measuring outcomes to understand the pilot program's needs, wants, and progress. This report also provides a proposed timeline by which the pilot program could be incorporated into the upcoming budget process.

## **THE BASICS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

Perhaps one of the most critical decisions Harris County Commissioners Court members make yearly is how to appropriate tax dollars. The resources used by county government derive predominantly from taxpayer dollars—from property taxes and charges for services (including fees collected by the tax collector, automobile registration, charges for patrol services, and toll road receipts). County government is responsible for providing essential services and programs to County residents. Those services are broken down into various categories, including public health, public safety, public infrastructure, County Services, and Government Administration. County entities and departments administer these services to help meet residents' needs, and the internal budgeting process used by each County department to develop its budget request is the strongest declaration of the agency's priorities for Harris County residents.

**What is community engagement?** Community engagement generally refers to the “broad range of methods through which members of the public become more informed about and/or influence public decisions” and how local officials can use “public involvement practices to help inform residents and help guide the policy

decisions and actions of local government.”<sup>1</sup> Meaningfully engaging the community in the County budget process fosters transparency about department fiscal operations, helps County officials be good stewards of taxpayers funds, increases public confidence and trust in the spending of such funds, and ensures that the programs and strategies that the County is implementing match the needs of Harris County residents.



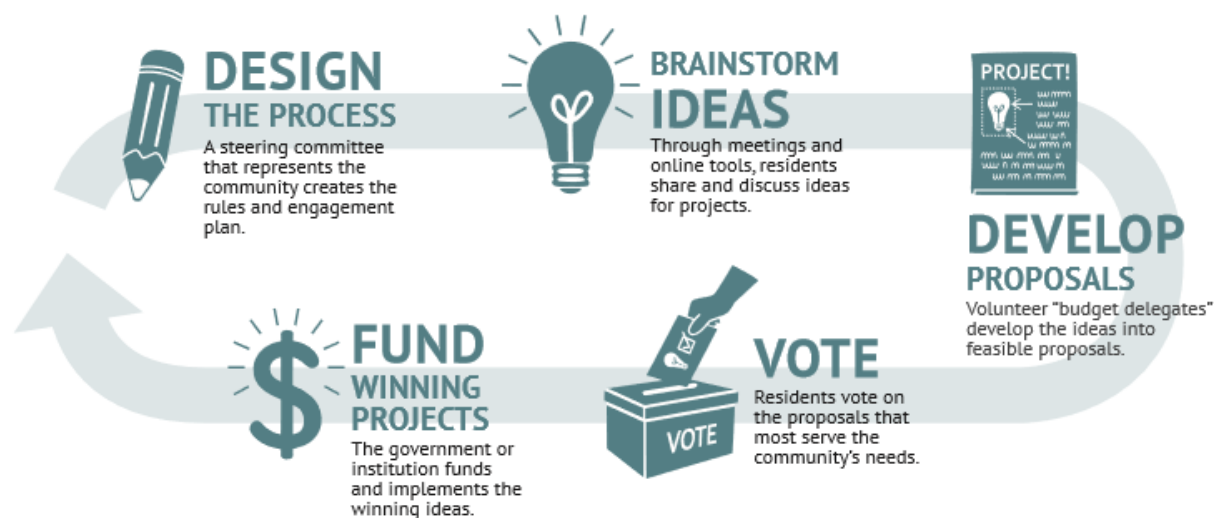
**What makes community engagement meaningful?** For community engagement to be meaningful, participants must have access to information about the topic at hand and, through discussion and deliberation, be given an opportunity to “jointly

<sup>1</sup> From “What is Public Engagement & Why Should I Do It?” by Institute for Local Government. Retrieved from [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg\\_what\\_is\\_public\\_engagement\\_and\\_why\\_should\\_i\\_do\\_it\\_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg_what_is_public_engagement_and_why_should_i_do_it_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794).

prioritize or agree on ideas and/or recommendations intended to inform the decisions of local officials.”<sup>2</sup>

**What is participatory budgeting?** One type of meaningful community engagement that focuses on including community conversations that provide information on the budget in the budget process is known as, Participatory Budgeting. Starting in Brazil in 1989, this democratic process allows community members to decide how part of a public budget should be spent, and has been used in over 7,000 cities around the world to decide budgets for counties and other institutions.<sup>3</sup>

A participatory budgeting project typically follows the steps included in this graph:



*Figure 1 Steps of Participatory Budgeting (Source: Participatory Budgeting Project)*

## **BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

Participatory budgeting is identified as a leading best practice because it deepens democracy, builds healthier communities, and creates a more equitable distribution of public resources.<sup>4</sup> In particular, participatory budgeting can produce the following benefits:

**Encourage residents to become more informed.** Harris County is in the process of providing opportunities for residents to conveniently learn about the process and

<sup>2</sup> From "What is Public Engagement & Why Should I Do It?" by Institute for Local Government. Retrieved from [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg\\_what\\_is\\_public\\_engagement\\_and\\_why\\_should\\_i\\_do\\_it\\_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg_what_is_public_engagement_and_why_should_i_do_it_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794).

<sup>3</sup> From "What is Participatory Budgeting" by the Participatory Budgeting Project. Retrieved from <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/what-is-pb/>.

<sup>4</sup> From "What is Participatory Budgeting" by the Participatory Budgeting Project. Retrieved from <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/what-is-pb/>.

get involved in decision making. Participatory budgeting would present residents with opportunities to understand better how their tax dollars are being spent and identify intentional allocations of those dollars to create positive local change.

**Better inform Commissioners Court members and County Department leadership about their constituents' needs.** Residents know what they need, where they want to live, and how they want to raise their families. By elevating their voices and ideas, Harris County leadership can better understand the impact that programs, services, county infrastructure, and facilities will have on community members' quality of life. According to the International County/City Management Association, resident participation is considered a core competency for successful public managers by helping residents understand the hard choices that budgeting entails can “assist policymakers in better understanding the programs and services residents value most.”<sup>5</sup>

**Generate more community buy-in.** By engaging residents in the budget process in a meaningful way, Harris County leadership can generate more support for the critical decisions they make. Enabling residents to be involved in shaping policy proposals, projects, or programs will ensure they better understand the issues and reasons for final decisions. Additionally, “good communications about the public’s involvement in a local decision can increase the support of the broader community as well.”<sup>6</sup>

**Increase fiscal transparency.** By increasing transparency regarding County finances and budget decision-making, Harris County leadership can earn residents’ trust and confidence in their stewardship of tax dollars.

## **PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING MODELS**

To effectively demonstrate the impact of community engagement in budgeting strategies, it is important to explore methods, and best practices learned from similar jurisdictions. Highlights from example jurisdictions are included below.

**Black Brilliance Project (BBP)<sup>7</sup>-King County, WA:** King County, Washington, is the most populous county in Washington state. King County community organizations are in the early stage of coordinating efforts to develop a budget proposal to reallocate dollars currently spent on the Seattle Police Department, Municipal Court, and the City Attorney’s office (the city prosecutors). The most significant

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<sup>5</sup> From “Public Engagement in Budgeting” by Institute for Local Government. Retrieved from [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/community\\_budget\\_5.5.14.pdf](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/community_budget_5.5.14.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> From “What is Public Engagement & Why Should I Do It?” by Institute for Local Government. Retrieved from [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg\\_what\\_is\\_public\\_engagement\\_and\\_why\\_should\\_i\\_do\\_it\\_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ilg_what_is_public_engagement_and_why_should_i_do_it_8.31.16.pdf?1472685794).

<sup>7</sup> From “King County Equity Now Announces Community Based Research Team.” Retrieved from <https://southseattleemerald.com/2020/09/30/king-county-equity-now-announces-community-based-research-team/>.



aspect of this model is that the community is designing and controlling the process. BBP is a community-led initiative by King County Equity Now and 14 Black-led nonprofit partners.

- The Participatory Budget Project helped develop a process called “Blueprint for Police Divestment/Community Re-Investment,” which aims to redirect the corrections budget towards alternatives to policing while prioritizing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. City Council used its 2020 Emergency Fund on Contracts to provide \$3M in seed money for the research process. However, the Mayor’s proposal for 2021 does not include additional funding.
- BBP’s first task was to create an online community needs survey that focused on identifying barriers to community-driven participatory budgeting. The unpaid survey can be completed by anyone and is also used as an invite to paid participation in additional community conversations and engagement activities.

**Your Voice, Your Choice<sup>8</sup>-Seattle, WA:** Seattle is the county seat to King County and Washington state’s most populous city. Seattle’s first experience with participatory budgeting began with youth programming in 2015 with a program now known as “Your Voice, Your Choice.” The program gives all Seattle residents the opportunity to provide input on the City’s budgeting priorities.

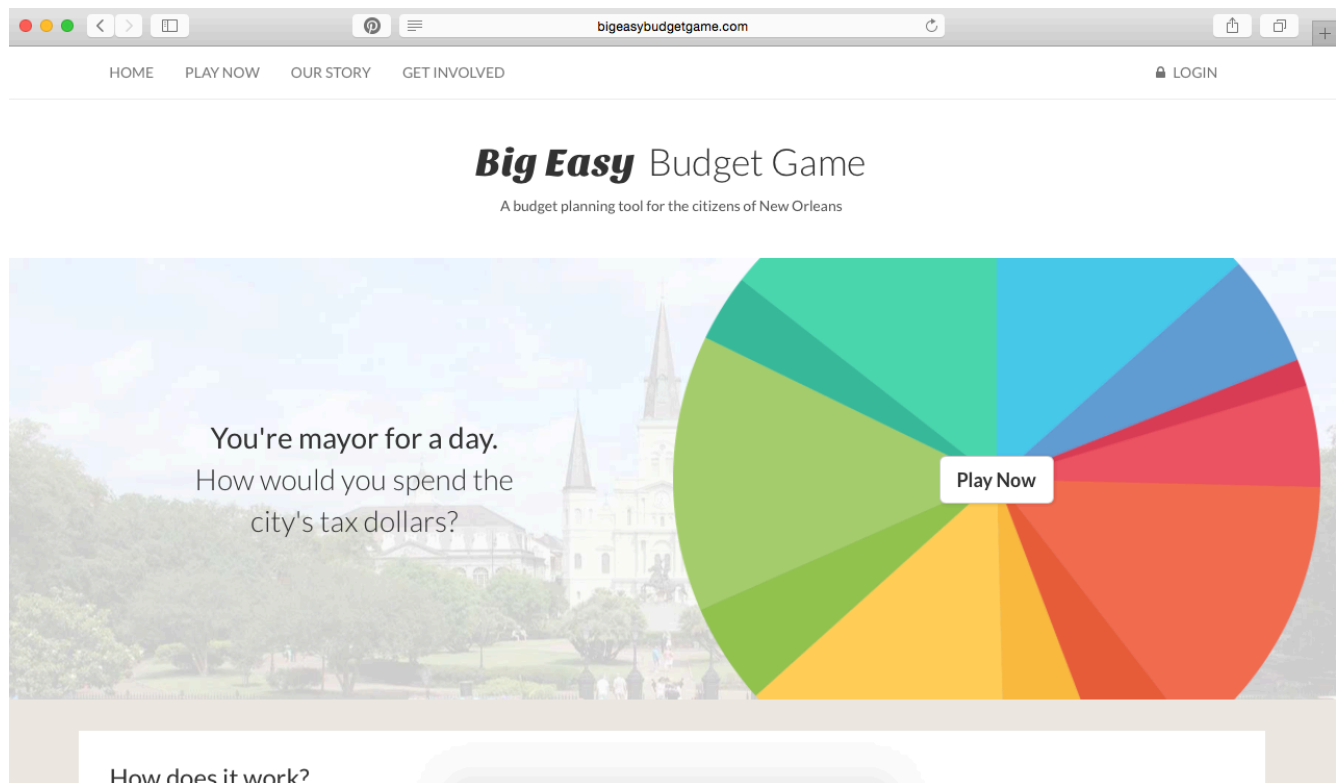
- There are four key phases to the Your Voice, Your Choice process:
  - **Phase 1, Idea Collection:** Community members brainstorm and submit potential project ideas to be funded throughout the city.
  - **Phase 2, Project Development:** Teams of community members work together to evaluate and prioritize ideas, narrowing down to a list of 8-10 project ideas per Council District.
  - **Phase 3, Vote:** Community members vote on their top projects within the individual Council District.
  - **Phase 4, Project Implementation:** After each City Council District selects top projects, City Departments include those winning projects in the following year’s budget.
- Since 2017, thousands of Seattle residents have voted for over 106 winning community projects totaling more than \$7 million of the City’s Department of Neighborhood’s budget. The program is currently suspended for 2020 because of uncertain economic conditions due to COVID-19.

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<sup>8</sup> From “Your Voice, Your Choice!” by Seattle.gov. Retrieved from <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/your-voice-your-choice>.

**People’s Budget<sup>9</sup>-New Orleans, LA:** The Big Easy Budget Breakdown is an online community learning platform managed by the Committee for a Better New Orleans (CBNO) and supported by New Orleans city budget staff that displays annual budget-vs-spending scenarios loaded with data that dates back to 2007. Residents are able to track spending by department, revenue source, and many other variables.

- The Big Easy Budget Breakdown includes “The Big Easy Budget Game,” an interactive website where city residents can simulate being “Mayor for a Day.” Players are able to balance the City budget using their own spending priorities.



*Figure 2 Budget Game Screenshot (Source: Committee for a Better New Orleans)*

- Once residents select department profiles, they are able to view the minimum required spending amount and previous
- s budget amounts.
- Each budget cycle can be enhanced with community engagement activities like neighborhood meetings, community calls, or virtual get-togethers to provide awareness and guidance on how to best access the budget information.

<sup>9</sup> From “People’s Budget Project” by the Committee for a Better New Orleans. Retrieved from <https://www.cbno.org/programs/peoples-budget-project/>.



## **CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING**

Effective community engagement and participatory budgeting can produce benefits for both County leadership and community residents. However, ensuring meaningful implementation of a participatory budgeting process requires an understanding of the following potential challenges:

**Ensuring inclusivity, representativeness, and equity.** It is critical in community engagement to ensure the community members' voices are heard and represent the community as a whole. All community members cannot engage in programs to the same degree, so it is important to account for residents' unique needs when planning programs. Additionally, it is critical to ensure less powerful voices and groups are not overlooked or marginalized. This requires including people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds as well as people with disabilities.

**Ensuring asks of community members are reasonable, supported, and accessible.** To create meaningful engagement and lasting partnerships with Harris County residents, it is essential for leadership to consider the amount of time, resources, and energy community members are being asked to expend. Asking too much of community members could cause them stress, frustration, or exhaustion. Community leadership could consider providing incentives to residents who demonstrate that their participation, ideas, and time are valued and reduce barriers to their participation. Such incentives could include stipends for engaging residents as Subject Matter Experts, childcare support, and/or transportation assistance.

**Following through on promises.** "Community members may become disillusioned if the community engagement process does not lead to action that reflects their input."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, community members may have been disillusioned by a previous bad experience where they felt let down by their representatives. Therefore, it is imperative that the agencies and leadership involved be fully committed to the process, as well as willing and able to follow through on the decision reached, and that reasonable expectations are set from the beginning.

**Making the process accessible.** Engaging with communities face-to-face is particularly challenging in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing has limited the ways in which community leaders can engage with community

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<sup>10</sup> From "Community engagement: A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families" by Child Family Community Australia. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/community-engagement/what-are-challenges-community-engagement#:~:text=%20What%20are%20the%20challenges%20of%20community%20engagement%3F,seek%20to%20establish%20community%20views%20by...%20More%20>

members. This requires creativity and innovation in order to continue reaching Harris County residents. New outreach and engagement methods may be required—for example, utilizing social media, web meetings, and survey tools. However, many community members may not be able to participate in remote events and activities. Special care must be taken to find alternative ways to reach community members in outstanding situations—including the elderly, people without access to technology or internet service, people with low computer literacy, people who work full-time or have multiple jobs and/or extra responsibilities such as caretaking and schooling, and non-English speaking populations.

Considering possible challenges, the first steps in exploring participatory budgeting could revolve around engaging community stakeholders around a specific project. This engagement could be narrowly tailored to provide stakeholders with the ability to consult on a given proposed project, name desired outcomes, and advise on how to develop budget tools that are transparent and supportive of their engagement in the process.

## **KEY ELEMENTS OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING FOR HARRIS COUNTY**

### **First-Year Pilot Goals**

The preliminary steps to establishing a participatory budgeting process include three milestones. These milestones focus on establishing a consistent and trusted means of communication that can serve as a feedback structure between county administrators and community stakeholders.

1. **Refine community engagement strategies that allow for building trust with underrepresented groups.** Focus on efforts that address the potential challenges to inclusivity and equity amongst the community stakeholders that participate in the budget process.
2. **Think through how to identify broad buckets for investment.** Identify a defined pilot project to begin advancing participatory actions. This process should aim to outline and identify community needs and resources for building capacity (both in infrastructure and relational).
3. **Develop and provide tools to facilitate participation and feedback.** The use of graphics and virtual tools are encouraged to facilitate transparency in relaying information about the project.

The detailed pilot project proposed below, a Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund, leverages efforts already underway by BMD to establish a budgeting-for-outcomes process to advance deeper engagement with community stakeholders about priorities, desired outcomes, and impact. It is a smaller-scope project that will allow JAD and BMD to jointly pilot, troubleshoot, and improve

strategies to increase the capacity for community participation in the budgeting process.

In the longer term, BMD intends to identify other subject matter areas suitable for reinvestment funds and best compatible with other forms of participatory budgeting. Identification of projects and funds will incorporate community needs and best practice research. Ultimately, these efforts will lead to the development of a plan that is scaled beyond one pilot project to incorporate participatory budgeting in other areas of the County Budget.

### **Pilot Project: Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund**

As a first step on the road to robust participatory budgeting, JAD and the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department are jointly seeking to pilot a Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund. A community reinvestment fund is a “teach a man to fish” model in which a backbone nonprofit organization actively partners with grantee direct service providers and leaders to strengthen their capacity, improve their services, and monitor whether their services are helping youth in the long term.

A youth justice community reinvestment fund would allow County resources to be allocated toward strategic investments into the sustainable capacity-building of home-grown community organizations and the services and supports Harris County youth and their families need. This model of community engagement has successfully improved outcomes for both youth and adults in other jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> The key to this strategic investment is a dedicated backbone organization that administers funds, supports the capacity and infrastructure development of direct service providers, collects data on outcomes, and uses that data to help providers improve through ongoing coaching through a process outlined as the “Four Fs”: Find, Fund, Form, and Feature.<sup>12</sup>

**Find.** Find people and organizations, based in directly impacted communities, that are already doing the work. Community members often provide resources for their

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Colorado's WAGEES program has consistently exceeded its education and employment goals for adult parolees, so much so that the state legislature has expanded the reinvestment fund model into other subject matter areas. See generally Colorado WAGEES, <https://wageesco.org/>. For a detailed report on how the WAGEES program was launched and the success it enjoyed in its first year, see Chelsea Thomson et al., Urban Institute, Investing Justice Resources to Address Community Needs 2 (2018), [https://www.urban.org/research/publication/investing-justice-resources-address-community-needs/view/full\\_report](https://www.urban.org/research/publication/investing-justice-resources-address-community-needs/view/full_report). The WAGEES June 2020 annual report, which demonstrates the program's continued success, is on file with JAD. Los Angeles has enjoyed similar success with its Ready to Rise Initiative, which funds direct services for youth. See generally Ready to Rise, <https://www.readytorise.la/>. The initiative is newer than the Colorado program, but has already funded nearly fifty organizations and is building capacity to measure outcomes with organizations from the first cohort. See Ready to Rise, 2019 Reflection Report (2019), <https://www.readytorise.la/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/R2R-2019-reflection-report-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> From Latino Coalition for Community Leadership. Retrieved from <https://latinocoalition.org/>.

youth on an informal volunteer basis or through unfunded or underfunded organizations. The backbone organization identifies these resources through grassroots community networks rather than top-down networks with government or larger service providers.

**Fund.** Fund these resources through an accessible and competitive bidding process. The backbone organization hosts an accessible “get ready” period to give service providers notice of the upcoming bidding process, helps providers establish 501(c)(3)s if necessary, and translates materials for the bidding process into an accessible format. Most importantly, this model represents the first step toward participatory budgeting because the backbone organization establishes criteria for awarding grants by eliciting community input on services to prioritize.

**Form.** Form grantees into organizations with sustainable capacity to provide high-quality services. This is where the bulk of the backbone organization’s work comes in. The backbone organization builds capacity in grantee organizations by providing support for each of the following organizational pillars:

- **Program Model:** A flexible, defined, and replicable system and framework for sharing a clear purpose that enhances staff’s ability to work toward a collective goal with meaningful outcomes.
- **Fiscal Management:** The understanding and administration of organizational finances and reports that allow the organization/program to effectively manage cash flow, budgeting, fundraising, personnel, resource management, and accounting requirements for program expectations.
- **Data Systems:** To collect, analyze and report on organization/program inputs and outputs in real-time to maintain accountability of the services provided, improve performance, and efficiently manage resources toward specific outcomes.
- **Organizational Culture:** The essence of the program/organization or its special sauce, which includes its core values, the reason for existence, sense of belonging, unique connection, and contribution to something that deeply matters to the organization/program staff.
- **Leadership:** Leadership is the guidance, direction, influence, service, and oversight provided to inspire people towards a common goal and guide them to find their path to develop their unique voice for others’ benefit.
- **Performance Management:** The ability and practice of measuring what needs to be done, using data as a feedback mechanism to inform all programmatic decisions/changes, and the accountability of meeting goals to ensure benchmarks are met or exceeded.
- **Community Access:** The ability for those most affected by an issue to equitably access sufficient resources for effective response. Community access

also refers to the relevance and impact of the organization/program in the community and being representative of the community it serves.

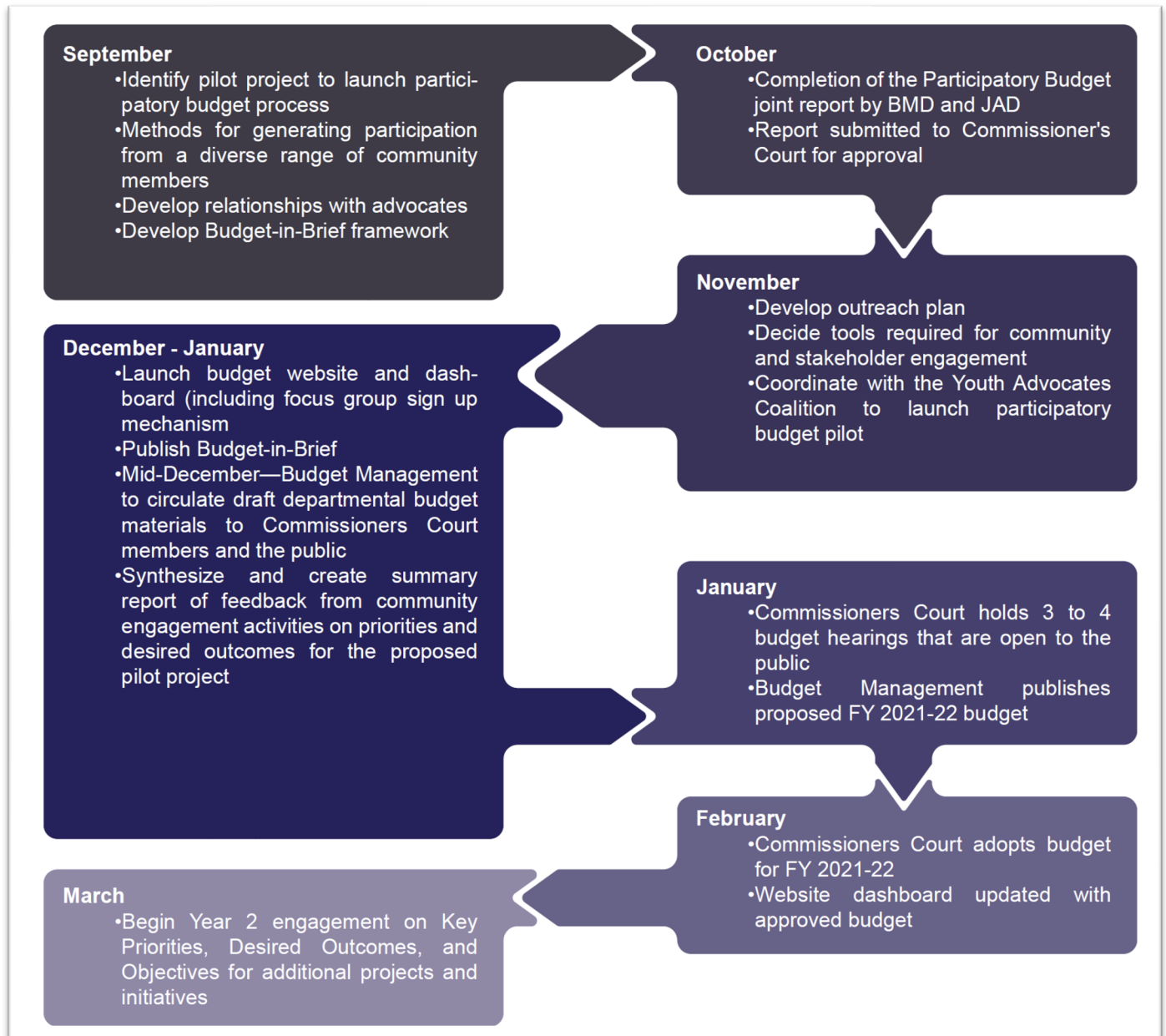
- **Resource Development:** The ability to engage stakeholders, create diverse funding streams, and broker employee talents and passions for the development and contribution to the organization/program, constituency and the community at large.
- **Partnerships:** The thoughtful cultivation of relationships with others for the benefit of the people/issues each works to serve and the humility to receive the strength of others while imparting your own to achieve common goals yet never losing your sovereignty in *the* process.

**Feature.** Finally, the backbone organization will feature grantee organizations by showcasing their vision for providing services to youth and using data collected through the program to demonstrate how each organization improves youth outcomes. The backbone organization helps grantee organizations access a larger platform with exposure to a broader network of service providers and funders.

The community reinvestment fund will be dedicated to investments in under-resourced- home-grown programs based in communities with the highest rates of juvenile detention. Supporting home-grown programs is important because programs owned and operated by people who reflect the youth and families they serve through lived experience, geographic location, and service priorities are best positioned to deliver services effectively. Funding these programs also gives a much-needed economic investment into communities that suffer from the highest rates of juvenile detention and high levels of poverty. This program's success in other jurisdictions has motivated youth justice system actors to commit significant portions of their budget to the youth justice community reinvestment fund, building community capacity to design and implement local public health and public safety solutions.

## Timeline

The following high-level timeline is proposed to incorporate the Participatory Budgeting Pilot Program into the upcoming budget process:





## APPENDIX

The Justice Administration Department would like to extend a special thanks to the Budget Management Department, that has been a steadfast partner throughout the research and development of this report.

Additionally, we'd like to extend thanks to all of our colleagues around the Country that were interviewed in this process:

- Kristina De Leon, Network Building Manager, and Shari Davis, Executive Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project
- Chris Adams, President and Brenda Morrison, Partner of Balancing Act by Engaged Public
- Sarah Schirmer and David Eichenthal of PFM consulting
- Katie Stewart, Budget Analyst City of Austin Budget Office
- Kelsey Foster, former Campaign Manager at the Committee for a Better New Orleans
- Elizabeth Tolzmann, Director of Policy and Planning and Zachary Hylton, Senior Policy Analyst of Ramsey County - County Manager's Office
- Latino Coalition for Community Leadership